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ABSTRACT

Part of an effort to more accurately describe the kinds of students attracted to and served by the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD), this report examines the relationship of student characteristics to enrollment patterns and describes a method for clarifying the image of students served. Drawing on national enrollment growth patterns for two- and four-year institutions, and 1970-1992 enrollment data for the LACCD, the report argues that the apparent rise of the nontraditional student has been largely a reflection of the expansion of the community colleges, not a significant change in overall student characteristics. Next, the report presents data showing that traditional college-age students are the majority of full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollees in the LACCD and argues that FTE is a more relevant measure than headcount for gauging the impact of characteristics on instruction and student services. The report then describes a four-cell matrix, designed to help convey student characteristics in a meaningful manner. The method focuses on the relative level of student involvement in the institution and the relative level of congruence between individual student goals and programs and structures. Students with high levels for both dimensions can be viewed as the institution's core population, while those with low measures for both may be welcome to the institution's services, but do not necessarily suggest a need for institutional change. The report concludes with a brief description of the application of the matrix for traditional and nontraditional age students in the LACCD. Data tables and nine references are included. (PAA)

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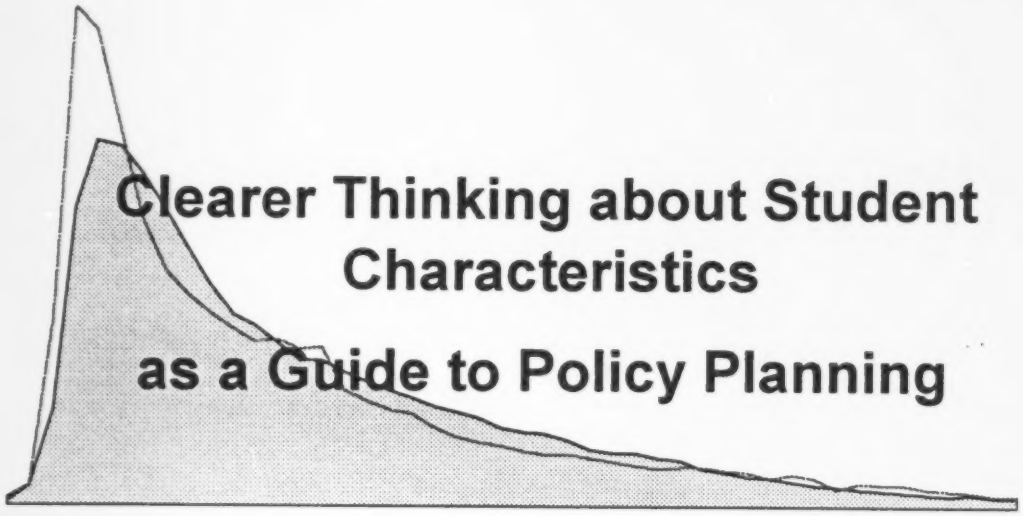

Clearer Thinking about Student Characteristics as a Guide to Policy Planning

George Prather
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JC 930 312

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June 1993

Educational Services Division
Los Angeles Community College District

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Executive Summary

How should we in community colleges describe our students? This is a crucial question for planning, decision-making, and setting priorities in an era of funding shortages. Hard choices can be correctly made only if we know what kind of students we are attracting and attempting to serve.

Much of the recent literature on college student characteristics has focused on the supposed increase in "nontraditional" students. These students are defined in various terms: older, working, ethnically diverse, low income, academically unskilled. The increase in these students has occurred on the national postsecondary level as well as in community colleges. But it corresponds with an increase in community college enrollments as a whole, and their increase overall has largely been a reflection of the expansion of community colleges, not a significant change in student characteristics.

Describing community college enrollment in measures of central tendency can also lead to misleading conclusions. Age is the most important indicator of student involvement in college. The average age of LACCD students in Fall 1992 was 29. But only 3% of our students are 29. The median age is 25, and only 4% of our students are in this group. The more illustrative mode is a very traditional 19 years. When distributions are weighted to full-time equivalents (FTE) rather than simple headcount, our students are seen to be even less "nontraditional". Since full-time students tend to be younger, more than half the weighted LACCD enrollment is under 25, a more "traditional" majority.

Nonetheless, it is true that our students have become more diverse in age as well as other characteristics. There are proportionally fewer younger and more older students, requiring some program changes and/or augmentations. But trends in age demographics point to an impending resurgence of younger students, in headcount numbers as well as FTE.

Such complex patterns of change compel a new approach to describing our students. Rather than fixing our attention on a single conceptual image of the community college student, we should use a map that will chart fluctuations and degrees of participation among the various kinds of students we serve. Modern organization theory reveals community colleges as paradoxical institutions, both porous and open like political parties, yet expected to transform their clients as profoundly as do more closed institutions like hospitals or boarding schools.

We have developed a matrix that measures students in two dimensions of relationship to the college: first, intensity of involvement in time spent at the college or in studies, as opposed to family and jobs; second, in degree of convergence of the student's goals with the program and structures of the college. The supposed rise of the "nontraditional" student implies that the colleges have attracted more students with low congruence and involvement with the institution. Preliminary research calls this trend into question. Characteristics which are really important to a student's relationship with the institution and which enable us to describe our students more accurately will be determined in further study using this matrix. Perhaps other myths like that of the "nontraditional" student will give way to a clearer, more nuanced picture of those we serve.

Clearer Thinking about Change in Student Characteristics as a Guide to Policy Planning[1]

How do we describe college students? That question would have been a nonsensical one in only the recent past. College students were young people in postsecondary education preparing to enter careers for the first time at graduation. They were almost completely uniform in age and, it was assumed, relatively uniform in the way they saw their college education relating to the rest of their life. No additional description was necessary.

This is clearly not the case today. Increasingly, wide segments of higher education find it difficult to portray their students to those outside their institutions, and even to policy makers within. The characteristics of students have changed substantially in recent decades. Diversity in student demographic backgrounds and in the reasons for which they are pursuing a college education have made the problem of description a very real one.

We would like to discuss the problem of how to describe students with particular reference to community colleges, which clearly have the greatest diversity of students and arguably the greatest difficulty in defining the purposes which they serve for these students. We would hope, however, that our conceptualization of the problem of description can be of use to other elements of higher education as well.

Community colleges are currently at a crossroads in the definition of their mission. The change in students has brought an ambiguity to our self image and sense of institutional purpose. however, Budget restrictions now being imposed require the setting of priorities and the determination of which students are most worthy of the opportunities that community colleges afford. We suffer from a lack of conceptual tools and information to make a wise choice at this crossroads. The absence of clear thinking has made it difficult to obtain and convey a sharply defined picture of our students. This in turn prevents internal leaders from facing the problem of priorities directly, and allows outside policy makers to impose priorities which may be

substantially at odds with institutional realities. In other words, it is exactly at this point that a precise mission and a clear image of whom we serve is most necessary.

Many of our students are older than the traditional college age, but many are also straight out of secondary school and still preparing for their entry into the adult world. Many are pursuing programs which prepare them for careers which do not require training beyond the associate or two-year certificate level, but many also plan to transfer to four-year institutions after varying periods of attendance in the junior institutions. Another very substantial group may select one or a number of courses for their own individually defined purposes with no intention of passing any of the institutionally defined mileposts. What's an institution to do?

Thinking about student goals has been particularly sloppy, reflecting institutional bias and largely uninformed by data about students. An examination of the change in the characteristics of community college students over recent years and the relationship of student characteristics to enrollment patterns and educational goals can help to clarify thinking about institutional purpose at this juncture, and can enable policy makers to consider community college institutions in both their uniqueness and similarity to other segments of higher education.

The Rise of the Nontraditional Student

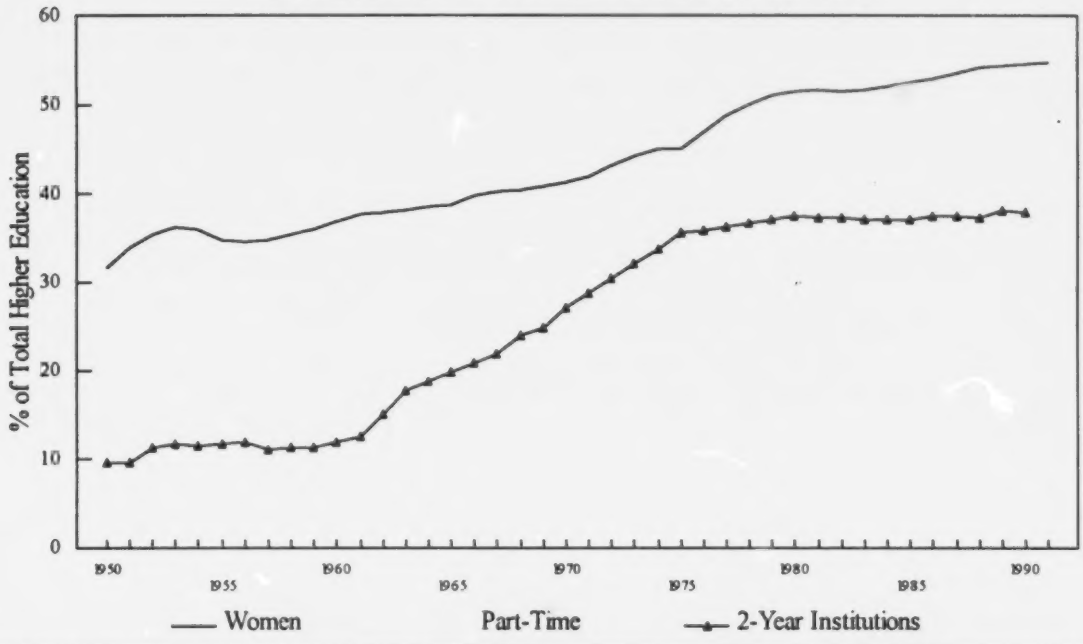
The rise of the "nontraditional" student has been the theme of most recent discussions of community college demographics. By this is meant that community college students are now older, ethnically more diverse, poorer and generally less well prepared for college work than students in the past. We believe that this conceptualization has been an unfortunate one. The term is an ambiguous one, since its meaning is imputed in opposition to *traditional student* which is itself undefined. At the same time, on examination of the historical data the empirical referent for the rise of the "nontraditional" student is at best subtle, and does not support the notion of a general sea change in student characteristics which has generally been depicted. The consequence is that we have been left with images and concepts which are misleading and are incapable of describing the character of the student body we now serve.

Descriptions of the "nontraditional" student have focused most on age, gender, and hour or unit load as the crucial characteristics. Cross (1980) described nontraditional students as adult part-time learners who carry full-time family and job responsibilities in addition to their college studies. Though struggling with substantial cross pressures, these students are relatively well prepared and would clearly have been successful in past schooling. Even a decade ago, such adult students were becoming a headcount majority on many campuses. Cross distinguished this group from younger, educationally deprived "new students", who need help in basic skills, motivation and guidance. But even adult students would require special scheduling, curricula and instruction appropriate to their maturity.

By the mid-eighties, the majority status of women was noted by the American Council on Education, whose report (1988) recommended transforming institutions to better meet the needs of women students. The gender factor was emphasized by Terrel (1990), who described the developmental needs of adult women students threatened by low self-esteem, guilt, and excessive demands on finances, time, energy and emotions. Changes and expansion in student services were recommended to meet the needs of this new clientele. The "nontraditional" umbrella has also been used to cover culturally different minority students (Westbrook and Sedalek, 1991), and students without a high school diploma (Apling, 1991). But the main focus has been on adult women attending part-time.

At first glance, national data on higher education enrollments seems to support the idea that broad changes have taken place over the past few decades. Figure 1 diagrams the increase in women as a proportion of all students in higher education from 1950 to 1991. This growth appears to be a long and steady trend, though the most rapid change took place before 1980 and has been followed by a relatively stable period. The increase in the proportion of students who are part-time is also seen to have been substantial but more episodic, having risen rapidly in the 1970's but remaining basically constant since that time. We will return to the growth in enrollments in two-year institutions shortly.

Figure 1: Growth in the Proportion of Women, Part-Time Students and Students in Two-Year Institutions, 1950-1991



*Calculated from Table 98, p. 93, Digest of educational statistics, 1974, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1975, p. 83; Table 98, p. 95, Digest of educational statistics, 1977-78; Table 160, p 172 and Table 166, p. 178, Digest of educational statistics, 1992. Some years have been interpolated.

Cross-sectional data support this view as well. As shown in Table 1, younger, full-time students, both male and female, have declined as a proportion of total enrollment in all higher education and have been replaced by older, largely part-time women. This has resulted in an increase of part-time students from 32 to 43% of all enrollment. This is also the dynamic which has produced the historic reversal of balances between men and women in higher education over the past twenty years.

But other, less global factors have been at work during the same period, and their examination produces an enrollment history with considerable more nuance. Returning to Figure 1, we can note that enrollment in two-year institutions as a proportion of all enrollment in higher education has risen dramatically, with the growth taking place primarily between 1960 and 1975. We also note that the increase in part-time enrollments appears to coincide very closely with the

latter part of this trend. The question is thus raised as to whether we have really seen the "rise of the nontraditional student" or witnessed the full establishment of a nontraditional institution, the nation's two-year community and junior colleges.

Table 1: Change in Student Characteristics, 1970-1990

Percent of Total Enrollment by Attendance Status, Sex and Age

	*National, All Higher Education**					
	1970	*1980*	*1990*	*1970*	*1980*	*1990*
Age Group	*Full-Time Men*			*Full-Time Women*		
<20	16.2	10.9	9.2	14.7	12.3	9.8
20-24	19.1	14.8	13.2	10.4	11.9	12.3
25-34	4.7	4.2	4.2	1.3	3.0	4.6
35+	0.9	0.6	1.1	0.7	1.0	2.4
Subtotal	40.9%	30.5%	27.7%	27.1%	28.2%	29.1%
	Part-Time Men			*Part-Time Women*		
<20	1.0	1.3	1.2	1.4	1.6	1.3
20-24	4.9	4.4	4.3	4.5	5.3	4.9
25-34	8.1	8.8	7.0	4.2	9.7	9.0
35+	4.0	3.6	5.4	4.1	6.6	10.2
Subtotal	18.0%	18.1%	17.9%	14.2%	23.2%	25.4%
	All Men			*All Women*		
<20	17.2	12.2	10.4	16.1	13.9	11.1
20-24	24.0	19.2	17.5	14.9	17.2	17.2
25-34	12.8	13.0	11.2	5.5	12.7	13.6
35+	4.9	4.2	6.5	4.8	7.6	12.6
Subtotal	58.9%	48.6%	45.6%	41.3%	51.4%	54.5%
	All Part-Time			*All Full-Time*		
<20	2.4	2.9	2.5	30.9	23.2	19.0
20-24	9.4	9.7	9.2	29.5	26.7	25.5
25-34	12.3	18.5	16.0	6.0	7..2	8.8
35+	8.1	9.9	15.6	1.6	0.7	3.5
Subtotal	32.2%	41.3%	43.3%	77.8%	68.7%	66.7%

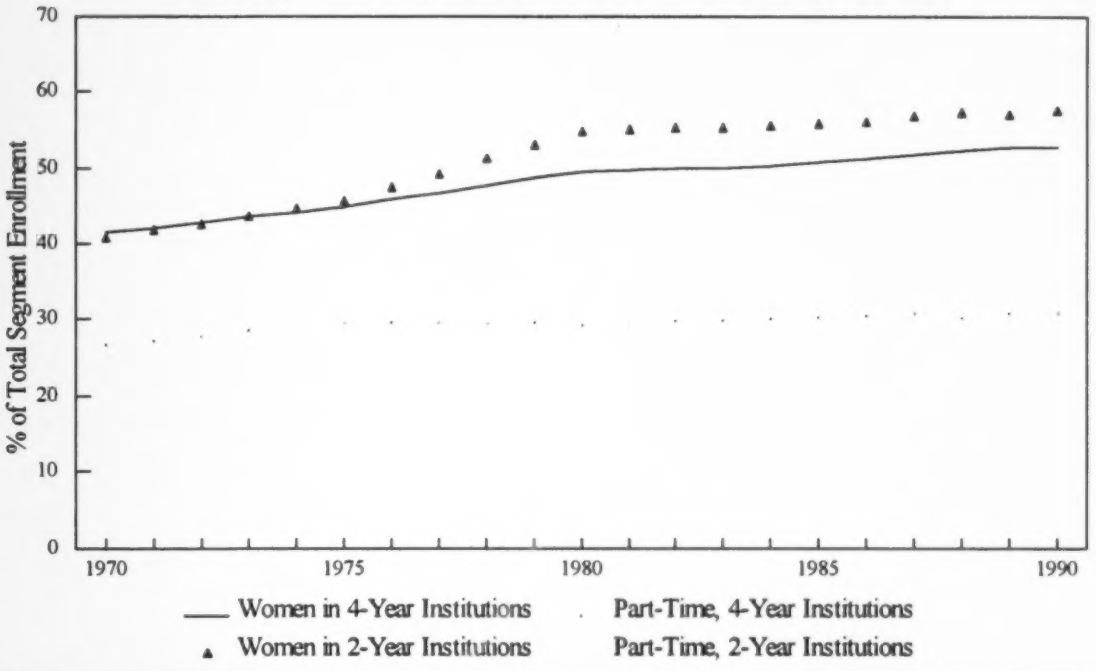
*Calculated from Table 162, p. 174 Digest of educational statistics, 1992.

Figure 2 suggests the latter. Part-time enrollment in four-year institutions has increased very little. Women in four-year institutions have switched from minority to majority status, but their rate of increase was outpaced by women in two-year institutions, particularly in the late 1970's. Finally, comparing Figure 1 and Figure 2, we see that as two-year institutions expanded to their

current plateau, roughly accomplished by 1980, this expansion was disproportionately in part-time enrollment.

Figure 2: Segment-Specific Growth

in the Proportion of Women and Part-Time Students, 1970-1990



*Calculated from Table 166, p 178, Digest of educational statistics, 1992. Some years have been interpolated.

Rather than a sea change in student characteristics, the rise of the nontraditional student has really been the extension of higher education service to a wider segment of the population through the fuller establishment of two-year institutions. The question then becomes one of how accurate and useful is the nontraditional label for characterizing the students of these institutions.

Table 2 begins to address this question. Because of the inaccessibility of detailed national data on two-year enrollments, we will compare available information for all two-year institutions with that for the Los Angeles Community Colleges for the period 1970 to 1992, and then use the Los Angeles data as "sample" with which to make further exploration..

Table 2: Change in Sex and Attendance Status in Two-Year Institutions, 1970-1992

National Compared to Los Angeles Community Colleges

Percent of Total Enrollments

Year	*% Female*		*% Part-Time*		*% FT Female*		*% PT Female*		*% FT Male*		*% PT Male*	
	*Natl**	*LA***	*Natl**	*LA***	*Natl**	*LA***	*Natl**	*LA***	*Natl**	*LA***	*Natl**	*LA***
1970	40.7		47.0		19.7		21.0		33.3		26.0	
1972		44.0										
1975	45.5	44.4	55.6		18.3		27.2		26.1		26.4	
1976		50.2		63.5		16.2		34.1		20.3		29.3
1977		53.0										
1978		53.7										
1979		54.7										
1980	54.8	54.1	61.3	66.6	19.3	16.2	35.5	38.2	19.4	17.2	25.8	28.4
1981		54.2										
1982		53.3										
1983		53.3		66.6		15.8		37.6		17.6		29.1
1984	55.5	54.2	62.4		19.0		36.5		18.6		25.9	
1985	55.8	53.7	62.7	61.5	19.1		36.7		18.2		26.0	
1986	56.0	54.8	63.8	61.8	18.6		37.3		17.6		26.4	
1987	56.6	55.1	64.2	62.2	18.6	16.6	38.0	38.5	17.2	16.2	26.2	28.7
1988	57.1	55.1	64.2	62.5	19.0		38.2		16.8		26.1	
1989	57.0	55.1	64.0	65.5	19.1		37.8		16.9		26.2	
1990	57.4	55.5	63.8	65.2	19.2	18.3	38.2	37.3	16.9	16.5	25.7	27.9
1991		56.0		65.2								
1992		56.2		64.6		19.0		37.2		16.4		27.4

*Calculated from Table 166, p. 178 Digest of Educational Statistics, 1992.

**Unless otherwise noted, all figures for the Los Angeles Community Colleges are from student records files of the Los Angeles Community College District as compiled by the Office of Research and Planning.

The Los Angeles Community College District is composed of nine separate colleges serving both inner city and suburban areas, and together enrolling 114,000 students, over 2% of the nation's total community college enrollment. As can be seen in Table 2, the current distribution of the Los Angeles students by sex and attendance status are remarkably similar to the national figures for two year institutions.

The similarity in the early part of the period is more difficult to establish because of gaps in the data, and because of the rapid change which was taking place during this time in indicators of both sex and attendance status. The main difference is in the greater proportion of Los Angeles students who were part-time in 1970 through 1980. In the Los Angeles District, part-time

students have been an almost constant proportion across the whole period. Bearing in mind, again, the rapid expansion of two-year institutions nationwide during this time, we would be inclined to read this as the rest of the country catching up to the more fully developed California colleges, and in the process coming to replicate their student characteristics.

The current similarity of Los Angeles with national data holds true for the cross sectional structure of age and attendance status as well, as seen in Table 3. The year 1987 is the only point for which national data was available to us. The table reveals the only significant difference to be a somewhat greater proportion of full-time students under twenty at the national level. Other differences would seem quite inconsequential.

Table 3: Los Angeles Community Colleges Compared to All Two-Year Institutions

Age and Attendance Status in 1987

Age	*All Two-Year Institutions**			*Los Angeles Community Colleges*		
	Full-Time	*Part-Time*	*Subtotal*	*Full-Time*	*Part-Time*	*Subtotal*
<20	14.6	7.2	21.8	10.7	8.9	19.6%
20-24	11.7	15.2	27.0	11.2	17.3	28.6%
25-34	6.2	21.3	27.5	7.0	22.0	28.9%
35+	3.3	20.4	23.7	3.8	19.0	22.8%
Subtotal	36.0%	64.0%	100.0%	34.8%	65.2%	100.0%

*Calculated from Table 164, p 176, Digest of educational statistics, 1992.

We would note one very substantial distinction between the Los Angeles Colleges and the nation's two-year institutions as a whole--the proportion of "minority" students. In 1984, less than 20% of all students in two-year institutions were of Asian, Black, Hispanic or Native American background. For the Los Angeles students, that figure was almost 58%, and it had risen further to over 71% by 1992.[2] The similarity of Los Angeles students in the other indicators is thus all the more remarkable, and even further calls into question the focus of the "nontraditional" concept.

Assuming the "representativeness" of the Los Angeles Colleges, we can use that database to examine the relationship of age to full and part-time status for both men and women. This information is not otherwise available for two-year institutions separate from all of higher

education. In Table 4, we see that very little change has taken place over the years which can be examined. Change in the proportions for the two youngest age groups appear erratic, but they are particularly interesting in that they mirror the tail of the baby boom generation moving through the higher education system.

Table 4: Change in Student Characteristics in the Los Angeles Community Colleges

Percent of Total Enrollment by Attendance Status, Sex and Age

	1976	*1983*	*1992*	*1976*	*1983*	*1992*
Age Group	*Full-Time Men*			*Full-Time Women*		
<20	4.6	5.9	4.2	4.3	5.8	4.5
20-24	4.6	6.6	6.4	3.3	5.1	6.5
25-34	8.4	3.8	3.9	6.1	3.0	4.8
35+	2.8	1.3	1.9	2.5	1.8	3.3
Subtotal	20.4%	17.6%	16.4%	16.2%	15.8%	19.0%
	Part-Time Men			*Part-Time Women*		
<20	2.7	4.3	3.6	3.1	4.9	4.4
20-24	5.2	8.7	8.0	5.5	9.5	9.8
25-34	11.2	10.0	9.3	11.4	11.4	11.6
35+	10.2	6.1	6.5	14.1	11.7	11.4
Subtotal	29.3%	29.1%	27.4%	34.1%	37.6%	37.1%
	All Men			*All Women*		
<20	7.3	10.2	7.8	7.4	10.7	8.8
20-24	9.8	15.3	14.4	8.8	14.6	16.3
25-34	19.6	13.8	13.2	17.5	14.4	16.4
35+	13.0	7.4	8.4	16.6	13.5	14.6
Subtotal	49.6%	46.7%	43.8%	50.4%	53.3%	56.1%
	All Part-Time			*All Full-Time*		
<20	5.8	9.2	8.0	8.9	11.7	8.7
20-24	10.7	18.2	17.8	7.9	11.7	11.9
25-34	22.6	21.4	20.9	14.5	6.8	8.7
35+	24.2	17.8	17.9	5.3	3.1	5.2
Subtotal	63.4%	66.7%	64.5%	36.6%	33.4%	35.4%

This cyclical shift in the age structure may contribute to the appearance of greater proportions of older, part-time students by depressing at the current time the numbers of younger students. But it also means that these younger students will return in greater numbers in the near future. In sum, it seems that the apparent rise in the nontraditional student has been an artifact of the growth of two-year institutions relative to senior institutions, making the attendance patterns

of two-year colleges more significant for higher education as a whole, and to some extent a product of the cycle of change in the age structure of the population.

Describing Students with Measures of Central Tendency and Headcount Statistics

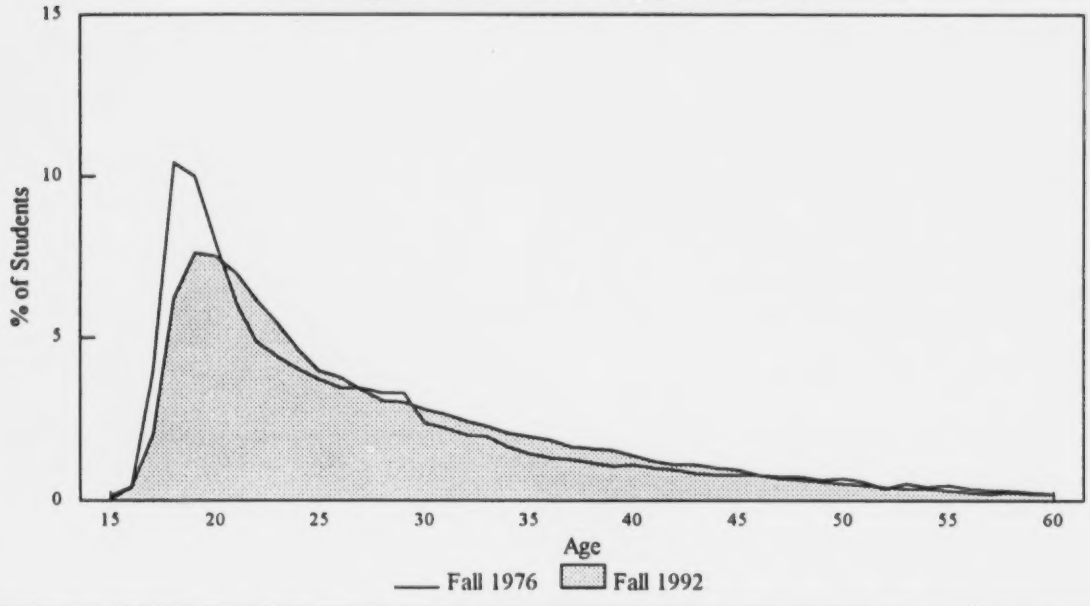
The nontraditional student is a seductive concept, so seductive in fact that it has made many both from within and outside our institutions ready to believe and act on the bias of indicators which are in no way characteristic of the whole, and in fact are quite misleading. In the Los Angeles Community Colleges, the average (i.e. the mean) age of our students is 29. Old indeed! The median age, which is a somewhat better descriptor of a distribution with a long skew toward the upper age ranges, is 25. The modal age is a very traditional 19. But only 3% of our students are 29 and only 4% are 25. Yet these are terms many would use to think about planning for student needs.

As can be seen in Figure 3, students are actually greatly bunched in the "traditional" age ranges though there are slight increases in the proportion of students at each of the older ages and the cumulative effect is not insignificant. The mean, median and mode have each increased by one year between 1976 and 1992. That is a significant change when describing large populations, but hardly reflects a fundamental transformation of the student body.

This bunching in the younger age groups also means that headcount-based statistics are less relevant as descriptors of the typical student client, at least if that description is to have any relevance to the classroom, where the individual instructor is more apt to see student characteristics weighted by "classroom seat miles". Age is very closely related to attendance status. Older students may have become the majority on a headcount basis, but in almost all institutions, those close to the age of "traditional college students" have continued to constitute the majority of student full-time equivalents.

Figure 3: Change in Distribution of Student Headcount by Age

Los Angeles Community Colleges, 1976-1992

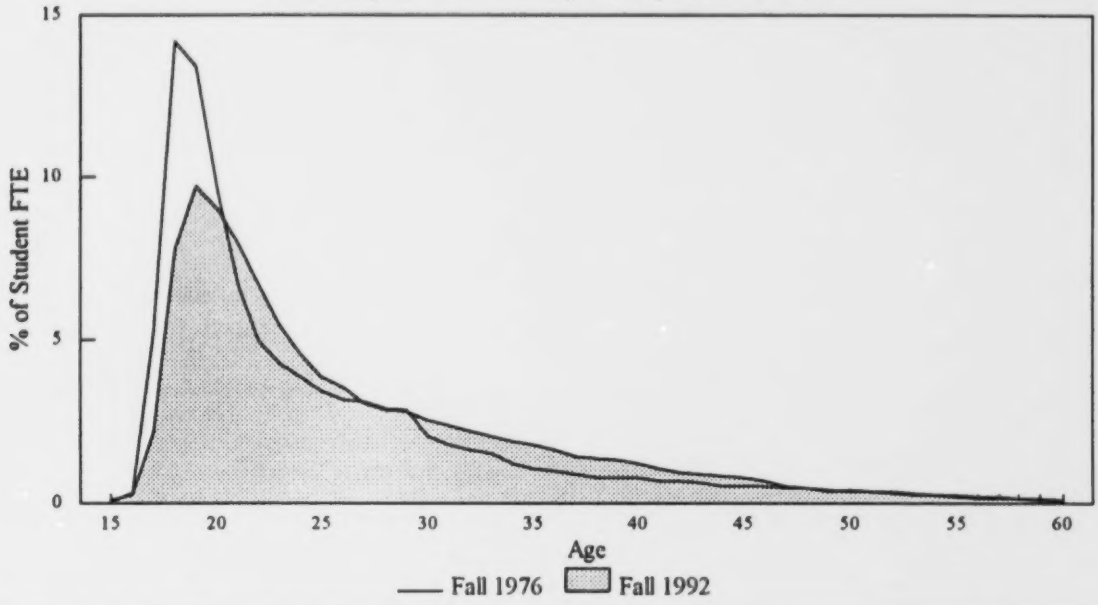


When student characteristics are weighted to FTE, certainly the more relevant approach for gauging the impact on instruction if not on student services, it is clear that the change has not been as great as assumed. In Figure 4 we present again the total age distribution of students in the Los Angeles Community Colleges, but this time weighting that array to reflect the class hours which each student attends. Intriguingly, the age array of student FTE in 1992 very closely approximates the 1976 headcount distribution shown previously. However we might compare the two, we can see that there continues to be a very substantial peak at the traditional ages.

This is an obvious point, but one which seems to be frequently lost in much of the discussion about the changing nature of community college students. The real message should have been that students have become even more diverse in age as in other characteristics, and therefore measures of central tendency have become significantly less useful for description. A way to convey the diversity of students rather than single commonalties is needed.

Figure 4: Change in Distribution of Student FTE by Age

Los Angeles Community Colleges, 1976-1992



The diversity of students is particularly significant when we address the question of student goals and the accountability of our institutions for moving their students toward the accomplishment of those goals. Student goals are closely, but not exclusively related to age, with younger students expressing much more frequent interest in transfer as opposed to occupational programs. Younger students, regardless of the changes in their other characteristics, remain more "traditional" in their goals. Thus the "modal bloc" of students, particularly when measured in terms of those who make the greatest use of instructional services, continues to be those who profess a desire to transfer.

The drop in the numbers of younger people in the population and the growth in older age groups has reshaped our student population over the last fifteen years. Fewer younger people has meant empty student desks which institutions have attempted to fill by offering more programs for older people, thus magnifying the actual change in the underlying population. We are now

approaching the point at which the numbers of younger people will again begin to grow, and unless institutional resources expand at a significant rate, the shift back to a more "traditional" student body will be as dramatic as that experienced during the last decade and a half. Reduced budgets and higher fees at the four-year institutions may already be accelerating this trend. Without greater clarity in describing and thinking about our students, policy will drift about among the various preconceptions of internal and external decision makers.

Clarifying the Image of Students Served

There is clearly a need for a conceptual map for examining student characteristics. We must address squarely the question of which students are at the core of our programs and which ones are more external. First, we must have a map which points to the current nature of the students who are the major recipients of our services, so that programs can be properly tailored to their needs. Secondly, a map is needed in order to conduct an informed debate of priorities both internally and with our external funding sources. Thirdly, it is needed for accountability--in order to define those students for whose success we are to be held responsible.

Organizational/institutional theory can help clarify our thinking about our student clients. Organizations, according to Katz and Kahn (1966), can be defined on a continuum from those with very firm boundaries, and clear differentiation from the surrounding environment, to those with very permeable boundaries which make them open to influences from their environment. The total institutions of Goffman's classic Asylums (1961) in which members/inmates are subject to the dictates of the institution across almost all aspects of their lives are at one extreme. The American political parties are the organizations most frequently cited as "open institutions" at the opposite extreme. In the first, entrance and exit have very explicit procedures, and the institution is assumed to have had a very specific effect on the individual before departure can take place. In the second, anyone who says they are a member of the institution is, and for only as long as they continue to say so.

Community colleges are institutions with somewhat ill-defined or porous boundaries., closer certainly to political parties then mental hospitals, and significantly closer to the "open" end of the continuum than other segments of higher education. Yet we are expected to produce change in the lives of our students, and from this paradox flows a good deal of the confusion about our students and our central purpose.

Two dimensions are necessary to define students along a continuum of membership in the institution. The first would be the intensity of involvement of the student in the institution. This could be conceived as the amount of participation, such as the number of hours in class or on campus, and the degree of participation in college life outside the classroom. It could also be seen as the relative weight of college participation versus other aspects of the student's life--family, jobs, etc.

The second dimension of membership would be defined as the degree of congruence of the individual student's goals with the programs and structures of the institution. Students seeking certificates or degrees or pursuing transfer programs as defined by the institution obviously have a high congruence with the institution. Those not pursuing a program but perhaps only the skills offered in a single course, keyboarding for example, may also have high congruence, though their intensity of involvement may be quite low. At the same time there may be those with high involvement who are actually interested in programs not offered by a given institution, or who are following their own eclectic vision of a college program, and who thus experience low congruence.

A bifurcation of each of these dimensions produces a simple four cell matrix which we believe captures dynamics which are useful for describing students and for exploring the relationship of institutional structures to student needs and goals. Taking up this exploration first, the matrix suggests questions to be asked and perhaps priorities to be set.

Those high in both congruence and involvement are clearly core students to the institution, and it is they for whom the institution is most responsible. The main question to be asked here would be how well are these students doing in program completion, and is there any tweaking of institutional structures which would contribute to greater success.

Figure 5. A Matrix of Involvement and Congruence

Involvement	*Congruence*	
	Low	*High*
Low	Low-Low	Low-High
High	High-Low	High-High

For those low in both congruence and involvement, the institution bears little responsibility. Such students may be welcome to the institution's services, perhaps on a space-available basis, to pursue their idiosyncratic goals or to learn more about the institution's programs as they decide whether to move into greater participation or congruence. But in the absence of evidence that such students represent aspirations or needs of concern to the greater society, their presence does not necessarily suggest a need for institutional change.

The last two groups, those of high involvement but low congruence, and conversely those of low involvement but high congruence, deserve special institutional attention. Significant numbers of high-involvement but low-congruence students would reveal a need to re-appraise institutional goals so that the institution can begin to offer the programs that these students seek. Substantial numbers of low-involvement but high-congruence students might indicate a need to adjust delivery systems so that these students can participate more fully.

Can this matrix also be used to develop categories which convey the diversity of community college students in a manageable and meaningful manner? The first question in any discussion of change in student characteristics is how such changes have affected the population of the four cells of the matrix. The thrust of the rise of the nontraditional student thesis would be that the

major change has been one of increased numbers of students low in both involvement and congruence. We now have more students basically "external" to the institution. Our own argument to this point would assert that the size of the change has been overstated and its impact exaggerated, but we would probably have agreed that "nontraditional" older students would be less integrated into our institutions.

Initial examination of data available to us along the lines indicated by the matrix, however suggests that even this may have been an unwarranted assumption. We find, for example, that broad involvement in the institution, as measured by greater participation within the classroom and with classmates outside the classroom, as well as by the use of other campus facilities and activities, to be primarily a function of attendance status, except that older full-time students are **more** apt to be broadly involved than younger full-time people.[3] This is despite the fact that we find older students to have significantly greater external commitments, as expected. We have also found, to our surprise, relatively few students with plans for only a short-term stay in the institution regardless of attendance status or age. The "nontraditional" appear to be very traditional in their involvement in the institution.

Our data address the element of congruence much less directly. What little evidence we have does indicate, however, that older students may find their plans more in line with the structures of the institution. And, we also find as many others have noted, that older students have much more clearly defined goals regardless of attendance status.

These preliminary findings and others suggest that the dimensions of the matrix will be useful in reducing the typography of age, sex and attendance status to a manageable number of descriptive categories. Sex, for example, appears to be completely unimportant in explaining differences along the dimensions being examined. Both age and attendance status seem to be independently important to some dimensions but not to others, so that even further reduction is possible.

We have argued the need for more precise and meaningful description of student's characteristics in order to accurately convey the realities of community college institutions to those who make decisions about them. We have shown that the rise of the nontraditional student thesis has been inaccurate to a degree and ultimately misleading rather than informative. We propose that student characteristics must be examined and described in terms of the nature of the student's relationship to the institution. In some initial analysis, we find that the dimensions of involvement in the institution and congruence of the student's goals with the institution's structures hold promise for developing a typology for describing and thinking about students.

Notes

[1]This paper was originally presented at the Association for Institutional Research, 33rd Annual Forum, Chicago, May 16-19, 1993.

[2]National figures calculated from Community college fact book, compiled by Elaine El-Khawas, Deborah J. Carter and Cecilia A. Ottinger, American Association of Community and Junior Colleges-American Council on Education, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1988, pp. 3-4 and p. 34 citing Digest of educational statistics, 1987, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1987, Table 205, p. 235.

[3]The following discussion is based on our analysis of data from the Los Angeles Community Colleges' Student Survey, Fall 1990. This survey is an in class, omnibus, sample survey administered to over 15,000 students across the District by the Office of Research and Planning.

All of our analysis to this point is preliminary, such that we do not wish to cite figures here. We are using composite indices constructed from question items intended for very different purposes. Full exploration of these dimensions will require sub-analysis of these indices, and ultimately the creation of question items which can address the concepts more directly. This is work which will be carried out in the next administration of the Los Angeles Community Colleges Student Survey in the Fall of 1993.

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